

## CENTERING PRAYER

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*In 1999, my father had a heart attack. Though he eventually recovered fully, his recuperation was slow and accompanied by extreme anxiety. While praying for him one morning, I decided to share with him a spiritual discipline that had been helping me. I wrote him a lengthy letter, explaining this discipline. I think the letter served him well, but I know it has served me well, for each time I get careless in this discipline I reread this letter to remind myself why I started this to begin with and why I need to continue.*

Dear Dad,

As you know, for the last year I've been taking an independent reading course called "Personal Spiritual Deepening." In my reading I have come across a practice called *Centering Prayer*. This is not a new practice, but rather an ancient practice of prayer that has, unfortunately, been neglected in recent centuries. In my reading I kept being drawn back to this practice, and finally, this fall, I began to incorporate it into my personal prayer life. It is not intended to replace other forms of prayer, such as petition and intercession, but rather to enhance it.

Although I am a just a beginner (a baby, a mere bumbling stumbler) in this spiritual practice, still it is transforming me in ways that make me very grateful. It is this gratitude, rather than any sense of accomplishment, which prompts me to write this letter. Some of what I will write I have learned in books; some of it is my personal interpretation of what I have read.

Let me begin by defining Centering Prayer. It is a wordless way of resting in the presence of God with an attitude of openness, contrition, and longing. It is a silent communion between oneself and God, like the silent communion between lovers who enjoy being together even when they are not speaking to one another. It is a way of loving God by simply sitting quietly in his presence, a way of being changed by his love as it flows to and through us. It is a silent consent to the work of God in our lives and a silent expression of our longing for his presence. It is a process of interior transformation.

Before I learned of Centering Prayer I had never connected the concepts of silence and prayer. Prayer was about words—mostly about me speaking my words. Along the way I learned that prayer was also about listening—listening for Gods words of wisdom, counsel, and guidance. But silence? How could silence be prayer?

But now I see it differently. I realize that silent prayer allows me to seek God on a level deeper than words and allows God to touch me on a level deeper than my conscious thoughts. Silent prayer allows me to push my thoughts, ideas, words, agenda and shallow understanding out of the way. It allows me to rest in the all-sufficiency of God.

The procedure of centering prayer is simple:

- Set aside twenty minutes twice a day to sit in silent prayer (or five minutes, ten minutes).
- Think of a “prayer word” which naturally draws your mind toward God or sums up your relationship with God at that particular time (ex. Love, Jesus, Healer, Helper).
- Enter your time of silent prayer by acknowledging your desire to be attentive to God.
- Then just sit quietly, resting in the reality of God’s presence.
- When distracting thoughts come to mind, gently let them go, then use your prayer word to bring your attention back to God.
- This is not a time to think thoughts about God.
- This is not a time to pray for people.
- This is not a time to make requests.
- This is not a time to ask for wisdom and guidance.
- This is a time to simply “be” in the presence of God.
- At the end of twenty minutes, thank God for his presence and return gently to your activities.

Now let me amplify some of those points:

I, being someone who often thinks in visual images, found myself seeing this time of prayer in this way: In the silence I am trying to make the waters of my soul as still as possible, so that the breath of God might be seen as ripples on the still water, or so that the hands of God might rest upon the surface of the still waters. If the waters of my soul are turbulent or agitated, God’s gentle breath will be lost in the tumult and his healing hands will be pushed aside by waves. So I must still the waters. I did not try to create this image—it just came to me—and it continues to be the image that comes to my mind as I enter my time of silent prayer. Always when that image comes to mind, my shoulders drop in relaxation, my breathing slows down, and I physically feel a release from anxiety and agitation. It is a most welcome entrance into a time of spiritual rest and refreshment.

Apparently some people come up with one prayer word that they use consistently. I, on the other hand, seem to move from word to word. At first, the word that seemed appropriate was *love*, because that best acknowledged my desire to be attentive to the God who is love and my desire to be transformed by that love. Then the word *open* seemed useful, because of my growing desire to be fully open to the deep work of God in my life. Later I moved to the word *still* because that reminded me that it was in the stillness of my soul that I was most receptive to God’s work. Then the word *heal* drew me to God because as I continued in this form of prayer I came to experience God overwhelmingly as the Healer (more on this later). Currently the word *Christ* best describes my spiritual desire, as I think about the meaning of Christmas and about my desire to have the spirit of Christ born anew in me each day. (“ . . . it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me.” Gal. 2:20)

Words from scripture may provide a good means of entering this time of prayer. For example, Isaiah 30:15 says, “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength.” It might be helpful to recite that verse and then say, “God I come to you now in quietness and trust, with a repentant heart, resting in your salvation.” Psalm 46:10 says, “Be still and know that I am God.” What better way to enter silent prayer than with that verse? “Oh Lord, in the stillness of these brief moments, I rest—I wait, I relax, I rejoice—in the knowledge that you are God. I let that reality sink into my quiet soul.”

Distracting thoughts will come—in fact, they will come flying and jumping and racing and attacking from all sides. No matter. Just let them go. Don’t get frustrated about them. Don’t focus on them. Don’t think you better write them down because they’re important and you don’t want to forget them. If they are important God will bring them back to your mind later. Don’t start praying about something that pops into your mind. God will lead you back to that prayer later if he wants to. Gently let the thoughts go. Use your prayer word to bring you back to simple attention to God. Think of the still waters of your soul. That is the most beautiful thing you can offer to God in these moments.

After twenty minutes, end with a prayer of words, perhaps the Lord’s prayer, the words of Psalm 23, or any words of thanksgiving to God. Perhaps you will naturally enter a time of intercessory prayer. Perhaps you may be drawn to read scripture. Perhaps you will feel so restless you will want to run around the house!

Probably in the beginning, if you are like me, you will think that what you just engaged in was a huge waste of time. You couldn’t keep your mind still. You could barely remember your prayer word. Before you even knew what you were doing you had compiled a to-do list a mile long. People you hadn’t thought of for years came racing into your consciousness. Far from resting in the presence of God, you were wallowing in a sense of failure and restlessness. That is what I experienced for weeks—and still do experience more often than not. Truly, I seem to be a hopelessly inept practitioner of this discipline. Week after week I learn more and more how uncentered and unfocused and undisciplined I really am.

But here is what I am also learning: that God honors *my intention to pay attention* to him. God meets me in the purity of my intention even though the reality of my attention is so weak. And what does he do when he meets me? He *heals* me and he *transforms* me. HEALS ME AND TRANSFORMS ME!

That is why I wanted to share this with you. I pursued centering prayer because as I read about it I sensed that God was calling me to practice it, but I didn’t know why. I knew, of course, that it was a means of seeking God with greater earnestness. But I didn’t know what the implications of that would be in practical terms. And of course, I felt like such a failure as I attempted the practice, that I didn’t see how there could be *any* significant implications.

Yet, despite my feeble efforts, as I continued the practice I began to experience something profound—not during the time of prayer, but later, as I went about my daily life. I felt as if, on some deep level that I couldn't even comprehend, beneath the level of my conscious understanding, I was being healed. And in that healing, I was becoming free from the past. I was becoming free to respond to the present moment without the baggage of old wounds and old pains and old distorted ways of thinking. I noticed myself responding to people and events differently than I had in the past.

I didn't know that this was a common experience for those engaged in centering prayer. I'm glad I didn't know that. I would have thought that I was making it up just to "fit the pattern." But I wasn't, because I didn't know that was the pattern.

But just this morning, I read these words in a book called *Centering Prayer in Daily Life and Ministry*, ed. Gustave Reininger, pp. 54-55.

"It is in our active lives that we should look for the fruits of our praying, not in the time of prayer. During the prayer as we notice thoughts entering our consciousness and then return to the sacred word, we establish a rhythm of consent to God's presence and action within us that continues as we move into our daily lives. We find that we are more appropriately detached from persons and issues to which we were formerly attached and that we are enabled to let go of disquieting distractions. As a consequence we are more present to what we are given to do.

"Over time we notice in ourselves an increase in the fruits of the Spirit that are listed in Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control . . . Most of us notice an increasing attraction to silence, solitude, and simplicity of life. Some persons report an increased capacity to listen to other people, a less judgmental attitude, and an increasing acceptance of others . . .

"What happens to us and in us through this way of praying is as unique as each of us is. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ takes each of us as we are, where we are, and calls us into a deeper relation with him and with others through him. That is and will always remain mysteriously personal."

You know, Dad, that I have spent hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars in counseling, trying to "sort things out" and "fix myself." All of those hours and dollars were well spent; I remain convinced that I needed to do that kind of work. But there came a point when I needed to move beyond that, or perhaps I should say, *beneath* that. I needed a work within my soul that was deeper than any human being or human effort could achieve.

That is what is so amazing about this form of prayer. It is not about anything that I can do, or achieve, or accomplish, or even think or say or understand. It is totally about God's work within me. It is totally about God. All I do is show up. All I do is offer my emptiness, my openness, my neediness. It is humbling, because I have absolutely nothing to bring to the process except my longing for God. And I have no idea how God

intends to work or what he intends to do when he enters my emptiness. My agenda means nothing; it's all about his agenda.

There is much more to be said about this, but now is not the time. I fear that the more I write now, the further I will stray from the point. Can we talk about this further when I come to visit?

I love you so much. See you soon...